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ABSTRACT

A self-paced, individualized program of instruction in eight languages (French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish) that has proven successful at San Jose State University (California) is described. The format of the program, options for individual scheduling and guidelines for class attendance, tutoring, and testing are outlined. Administrative issues in the selection and development of instructional materials, grading, recordkeeping, and program coordination are examined. Balancing the program structure and promoting flexibility to help minimize student procrastination problems is described. Statistics are also given to show the enrollment growth in each Spanish course and to indicate the proportions of enrollment in classroom and the amount of individualized instruction in each language. (MSE)

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ABSTRACT OF PAPER, INDIVIDUALIZED SELF-PACED LEARNING PROGRAM IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES AT SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

Esther Pereyra-Suárez

Individualized learning offers a practical, pleasant alternative to traditionally structured classes. For the past eight years, the Department of Foreign Languages at San Jose State University has been involved in an ever-growing and successful program of individualized instruction in French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. These courses are designed for students who enjoy learning independently, are highly motivated, possess good study skills, and are unable to attend campus classes on a regular basis. Through our program, we have been able to ensure greater success among students and challenge them to involve themselves more responsibly and creatively in the learning process.

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INDIVIDUALIZED SELF-PACED LEARNING PROGRAM IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES AT SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

Esther Pereyra-Suárez

For the past eight years the Department of Foreign Languages at San Jose State University has been involved in an ever-growing and successful program of individualized instruction in eight languages: French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. Enrollment for this fall numbers 350 students.[1] We offer individualized courses as an alternative for classroom-bound learning because we believe that, given the appropriate tools and skilled direction, highly motivated students can acquire a language at an individualized pace and within time frames selected by the students. This innovation has been adopted by such prestigious institutions as Ohio State University, Temple University, Cornell University, University of California, Davis, and Duke University, to name but a few. In the immediate geographical area, however, SJSU is the only institution of higher learning that has advanced to a considerable degree the individualized format for language acquisition through unique programs designed for students who cannot attend regularly scheduled classes. As chairperson of the Audio-Visual and Individualized Learning Committee and coordinator of the Spanish courses, I have been responsible for the preparation of study guides, activities packets, greensheets, and self-evaluation materials used in our department. This experience will enable me to

give a description of the program, to discuss what is involved in setting it up and the problems encountered, and, finally to share some data concerning the individualized program in general and the Spanish courses in specific.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

Individualized learning in foreign languages shifts much of the responsibility from the teacher determining the group's schedule to the student deciding his or her own schedule. The student chooses when he or she will work on, say Spanish; how fast to proceed; how much time to spend each day; when to take tests; and, within limits, how much material to cover during a semester.[2] Students work independently, aided by textbooks, audiotapes, video tapes, learning packets, computer programs, and consultation with faculty. A mini-media lab, open 36 hours a week, has facilities for video-, audio- and computer-assisted instruction. Students may also copy tapes for home use. Graduate assistants are on hand for tutoring and testing services. A professor from the students' chosen language is available for help during office hours and to grade and monitor the students' progress. Flexibility of scheduling and the opportunity to complete from 1-20 units of credit, depending on need and interest, provide a welcome alternative to traditional classroom formats. Like the classroom track, the self-paced individualized programs aim at teaching all four basic communicative skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The content covered, type of learning experience, amount

of learning activities and demand on students' time are equivalent to an on-campus course.

Learning packets and green sheets explaining the course objectives and goals are distributed at an orientation meeting at the beginning of the semester. Students are also provided with class hours and office hours of the faculty whose course they are studying; they may attend any regularly scheduled section of the same course. Students are tested on their comprehension and knowledge of each unit by examinations and are given the opportunity to retake tests after a few days of review if they do not achieve the minimum score of 70%. After passing each test, they advance to the next unit and repeat the process until they have passed all of the units they have signed up for. Students receive a grade for each unit. At the end of the semester, the grades for each unit exam are averaged to produce a final grade. By taking all the time they need to with a given unit of the material, many students find they learn the material better -- hence get better grades -- than they would in regular classroom instruction.

Students may take from 1 to 5 units per course. There is a required time table for examinations, with the frequency of exams depending on the number of units students enroll for. Those with 5 units have to take a test every 3 weeks; those with 4 units, every 4 weeks, and so on. All tests must be completed before the last day of instruction. Students are permitted to increase or decrease their unit load as the

semester continues, but this adjustment of units must be done at least 6 weeks before the end of the semester. Incompletes are given only for serious illness or extreme personal hardship to students who have completed a major portion of the work with a passing grade.

Generally speaking, the students attracted to the programs usually have some experience with languages and tend to be the more determined and self-disciplined ones at the university. More important than language ability for success in the individualized program are personal motivation and good organization. Individualized courses respond to student interest and need for flexible modes of language learning. They accomodate students who require more time than the classroom pace permits, as well as those who can progress at a faster pace. However, individualized learning may not be suited for everyone. Many students find that they miss having a teacher set deadlines and guide them through the lessons, or that they prefer having classmates to work with and compare their own progress to in a traditional classroom setting.

SETTING UP THE PROGRAM

The preparation for the program takes a lot of work, a lot of typing, and a lot of careful planning. The program which on the surface may look less structured is actually more rigidly constructed. Individualized learning requires extensive and detailed planning in

several areas: curriculum, record-keeping, administration, use of space, and facilities. The first question is undoubtedly that of choosing an appropriate textbook according to the very specific demands of the program. Such a text must have grammar explanations in English, it must be prepared for individualized study (meaning it must consist of a workbook, laboratory exercises, an individualized manual with practice tests and answers for all the work, and at least two sets of tests for each unit). The text must also be divisible into credit units. All language courses at SJSU -- classroom and individualized -- use the same textbooks. The textbook, workbook and tapes we use in Spanish 1AI/1BI are Habla español?, Essentials, Second Edition. The Spanish faculty prepared all the written tests and keys to the exercises in the book. I wrote the accompanying Learning Packet for the 10 units that lists specific learning objectives along with suggested activities for mastering them. I prepared oral exams for each unit and also wrote an Orientation Packet that provides suggestions on how to study a foreign language. At the beginning of the semester, every student receives a copy of this packet as well as the green sheet and the keys to the exercises.

In our program, tests can be taken only after all preliminary work has been completed, and the student must perform at the C level or above in order for a test to count. The tests are administered individually in the laboratory and consist of both oral and written

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components, which count for 40% and 60% of the unit grade, respectively. Our testing program has shown us that while students acquire the reading and writing skills very well, developing the oral skills is more difficult. We have developed several ways to deal with this problem. First, there is the laboratory. Second, all students, particularly those with no background in the language, are strongly encouraged to spend time in the regular classroom or to ask help from the graduate assistants. This approach seems to produce adequate familiarity with the spoken language as well as to provide opportunity for practice.

Record keeping for each individual student can easily become a cumbersome and time consuming task. For this reason, a very conscious effort was made in our program to keep our student record forms as simple as possible. When a student enrolls in the program, a file is opened in his or her name. The file consists solely of a manila folder with the student's name and an appropriate student record sheet for the course. On this page we keep track of all the work the student completes, all exams taken, the form (A, B, C) of the exams taken, whether or not an exam was repeated, the grade, grader and date the exams were taken, and finally the final course grade reported for each course completed. In the same folder we keep all the student's tests and compositions.

The individualized learning staff tries to be available 5 days a week

between 10:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. and two evenings from 5:00-8:00 p.m. In Spanish, we have two instructors and two graduate assistants who meet with students. The coordinator is in charge of supervising the whole program, keeping records, and generating program materials.

One final aspect of the program is the student evaluative comments. These are important for receiving feedback on the success or problems of the program, and for establishing credibility for the independent learning aspect. We also have achievement data for individualized vis-à-vis classroom students: the same final test is given to two regular and individualized classes.

PROBLEMS

The support of the department is essential to the operation of a successful individualized program. However, as frequently happens with innovation, not all faculty members are equally enthusiastic with regard to the value and potential of self-learning courses. I am attempting to win over the doubters through positive results attained in our offerings and to persuade them that we are on the right track.

The major difficulties students experience in the individualized program are nearly all related to their tendency to procrastinate. While the classroom track provides a day-to-day syllabus and specific dates for exams, the individualized programs encourage students

to work at their own pace. The problem, of course, is that for many students, "at their own pace" ends up meaning at no pace at all, and students who begin the program intending to complete as much work as is done in the classroom -- or even more -- often react to the program's flexibility in such a way that they do very little work during the first seven or eight weeks and then must put in enormous amounts of time at the end of the semester in order to complete even the minimum amount of work required.

In its five years of operation, the Spanish individualized program has undergone a steady evolution from nearly total flexibility to more structured flexibility. This process has been necessary to counteract the human tendency to procrastinate. Flexibility is still an important and valued aspect of the individualized learning concept for us, and we do not believe we have undermined it in any way by adding the structure that we have. We have found that only the most organized and self-initiating person can work effectively in an environment of total freedom. For most of the others, the setting of a minimum amount of required work seems to be necessary.

CONCLUSION

As can be seen in the two reports at the end of the presentation, our program is working with positive results. Since fall 1980, we have expanded our individualized learning program in Spanish

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from an FTS/S of 3.14 to 23.87 FTE/S in spring 1985.[3] We currently have 30.2 FTE/S enrolled in five different Spanish courses. Enrollment statistics[4] reveal that the department now has, for those courses where students may opt between regularly scheduled classes and individualized study, 57% of its students enrolled in individualized courses. Clearly, our students welcome the alternative to classroom instruction which our individualized programs offer. We plan to grow and continue developing diverse materials for these courses and others. I believe that we have been able to ensure greater success among students and challenge them to involve themselves more responsibly and creatively in the learning process.

NOTES

1 The enrollment is divided between one-year programs in French, Italian, and Latin; two-year programs in German and Portuguese; and three-year programs in Hebrew, Russian and Spanish. At SJSU, the elementary level is indicated by course numbers from 1 through 10; the intermediate by numbers 15 through 25, and the advanced by numbers from 100 up. The letter A indicates the first semester, and B indicates the second semester. I means individualized.

2 Individualized learning offers choices in four major areas: objectives (individualized), rate (self-paced), method (multimedia),

and content (minicourses). The variable-credit approach to the material covered involves the division of a single five-credit course into five one-credit mini courses. See Renée S. Disick, Individualizing Language Instruction: Strategies and Methods (New York: Harcourt, 1975).

[3] This table demonstrates the growth rate of FTE/S in the Spanish individualized learning program at SJSU from its inception in 1980 to 1985.

Semester	Courses	Students who received final grades	FTE/S
Fall 1980	1AI	15	3.14
Spring 1981	1AI	48	9.67
	1BI	13	3.06
Fall 1981	1AI	56	11.33
	1BI	35	7.87
Spring 1982	1AI	35	6.27
	1BI	24	4.80
Fall 1982	1AI	44	7.53
	1BI	16	3.86
	25AI	22	6.20
Spring 1983	1AI	50	9.26
	1BI	27	5.93
	25AI	16	3.27
	25BI	10	3.07

Semester	Courses	Students who received final grades	FTE/S
Fall 1983	1AI	53	10.33
	1BI	16	3.47
	25AI	13	3.54
	25BI	19	5.14
Spring 1984	1AI	60	12.34
	1BI	25	4.34
	25AI	19	4.68
	25BI	13	3.07
Fall 1984	1AI	57	10.19
	1BI	22	4.27
	25AI	21	4.13
	25BI	14	3.47
Spring 1985	1AI	60	12.13
	1BI	24	4.93
	25AI	13	2.47
	25BI	20	4.34
Fall 1985	1AI	61 students enrolled	14.00
	1BI	34 " "	7.60
	25AI	21 " "	5.40
	25BI	11 " "	3.10
	101AI	6 " "	1.40

[4] Comparison of classroom and individualized learning for fall 1985 enrollments in the Department of Foreign Languages at SJSU:

Language	Total enrollment	Classroom enrollment	Individualized enrollment	% in individualized learning [5]
French 1A-1B	198	127	71	28
German 1A-25B	122	86	36	43
Hebrew 10A	11	8	3	16
Italian 1A-1B	64	29	35	67
Latin 1A-1B	21	0	21	100
Portuguese 10A-20B	44	14	30	78
Russian 1A-101	21	0	21	100
Spanish 1A-101A	390	257	133	30
Total Dept. of Foreign Languages in courses listed above	871	521	350	57

[5] Percentages are rounded.